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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teaching techniques and materials applicable to adult continuing education are examined. Continuing education refers to an older student's pursuit of additional education of any sort. Often the adult student desires instruction in foreign language and culture. A continuing education language course will have students of widely varying ages with very different needs and capabilities. Appropriate curriculum, textbooks, and materials must be used to teach such a class. For example, youth-oriented subject matter should be avoided while greater than usual emphasis should be placed on cultural materials and translation practice. Research has indicated that adults do not perform as well as younger students when learning in a pressured setting. A Wisconsin study of about 1,000 continuing education students found that these students differed from regular students in terms of scheduling, transition back to the educational setting, and faculty relationship. However, it is possible to expand and modify teaching techniques and materials to meet the needs of the adult continuing education student. Generally, the teacher will find that such students are highly motivated and willing to work. (RW)

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THE ADULT STUDENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

by

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Let us be clear from the start about our approach to our subject: we mean to examine some of the possibilities and the opportunities for foreign language teaching in the expanding sector of the teaching world known as continuing education, where we find the presence of the so-called "adult" student. We intend to comment on foreign language teaching techniques and materials appropriate for use with this relatively non-traditional sort of student with the aim of facilitating our welcome to them.

Although we have drawn on several published sources which are available, and of course we refer to our own experiences, we must acknowledge one especially valuable reference on the subject: Elizabeth Joiner's slim volume titled The Older Foreign Language Learner published late in 1981 by the Center for Applied Linguistics and available through ERIC.

"Continuing education" is a broad term, used to cover any older student who seeks additional education of any sort after the generally accepted end of a college age — roughly around 25 years of age. Ruth Weinstock in her work The Graying of the Campus (New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1978) deduces that the major shift to a higher percentage of population in the older sector will of necessity increase the number of older students in post-secondary educational situations. Some educators even predict that the 1980's will be known as the decade of continuing education. One study asserts that the number of retired persons in the U.S. already nearly equals the entire population of Canada (Emerging Issues 1979 in Joiner, p. 6). High school teachers conceivably could be drawn in to teaching older students in after-school hours or weekend sessions. We have even heard of some older students who are asking permission to

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enter regular high school classes where no other foreign language instruction is available in their community. Many people, then, after the age of 25 now choose to widen their knowledge — some through private instruction, some through non-credit sessions of varying shapes and lengths, some through classes carrying credits, some at technical or vocational institutes, some at two year community colleges, some at more or less traditional colleges and universities. Some students seek personal enrichment; some seek degrees; many seek to upgrade their employment situation. Some will be inthe category of part-time students; some will carry full-time course loads at established institutions.

We note with cautious rejoicing that frequently the returning adult student requests instruction in foreign languages and foreign cultures. As we have mentioned above, this request may even occur within regular high school classes. Some may want to brush up a language studied earlier; some may want to learn a language useful to their jobs; some may anticipate using the language as travelers. Some may request very specific foreign language subject matter — say, business French or Spanish for social workers or health workers or even for policemen . Some few may seek an additional teacher certification in a foreign language. In any case, we are apt to be asked to respond to a variety of needs for students of varying ages. It is probable that most of us foreign language teachers already know where to look for specialized vocabularies and usages; we may already have them among our reference materials; if not, many bibliographical listings of such things can easily be found.

But we may not yet have taken the time to consider the specialized aspects of the teacher-student learning process now necessary when we face our adult students. Most of us have had exposure to several theories of learning and teaching in regard to children and adolescents, perhaps even including young adults. We have considered the teaching strategies for

foreign or other languages in the light of this theoretical knowledge. However, we need to re-examine what we do in our teaching as we aim it at the continuing education students. Some experts divide adult students into several age groups, such as: early young — 18-25; late young — 26-39; early middle age — 40-55; late middle age — 56-64; early old age — 65-80; late old age — 80-?. Thus, complicating the teaching situation is the fact that, beyond the usual individual differences in any one of these groups, we may now be faced with students of widely differing ages and stages of maturity in the same classroom: any combination of these groups may turn up in our future classes. What should we know about our older students, at the very least in a general way?

First of all, can we discover why our adults are returning for more education? And just what sort of people are they likely to be? As you may guess, many broad surveys have already been done on the subject. Elizabeth Joiner's book cites some of their results (p. 3.) One such survey shows that 50% of a random group of adults had studied something in the immediately preceding year. This study was usually precipitated by some transition in their lives, either job-related or personal. So we may ask whether our students are going through some sort of transition period. In another survey 46% of those who returned for study as adults already had some post-secondary education behind them. So we may assume that for at least some of our students, they are not in their first return to studying. Whites and the well-to-do are reported to return more frequently than blacks or the poor. To quote Elizabeth Joiner (p. 3):

> Today's older learner, then, is likely to be a white person in late young adulthood or early middle age. He — or very probably she — will be fairly well off financially and moderately well educated . . . [returning because of a transition related to his or her occupation].

Indeed, with the projected shift in the mass of population toward the elderly, we will very probably soon be faced with more and more numerous students from the ranks of the older middle aged and the elderly.

> In the future, it is likely that we will see many of the students now in high school at a number of stages in their adult lives, for it is predicted that they will have three different careers and seven different jobs, that they will be able to schedule their lives flexibly with alternating periods of work and education, and that they will be able to engage in more leisure-time activities . . . Our hypothetical student mmght appear first, for example, in an undergraduate French class, then return to take a course in commercial Spanish required for a job change, return once again to take a "Japanese for Travelers" course prior to a trip to the Orient, and finally appear in an Elderhostel German class (provided, of course, that these programs are made available). Thus, the foreign language classes of the future are likely to contain a much higher proportion of students from <u>all</u> the stages of adulthood, and we are likely to see the same students, addicted to learning, returning to colleges and universities at various stages of their lives. At this point, the term nontraditional may become relatively meaningless, as what is now a fairly homogeneous college-age population becomes more and more diverse. (Joiner, p. 4)

When, as predicted, several students of widely varying ages do show up in the same class, we will have to be aware of their differing needs and capabilities in order to facilitate their language learning. Some experts profess that what we have already learned as pedagogy — with the usual emphasis on the education of the young — may apply only imperfectly to returning adults. It is even suggested that we may need a new term — andragogy — and some new methods for our new teaching (Facca and Walker, "Andragogy," in <u>Lifelong Learning</u> 3, cited in Joiner, p. 7). Morever, we must remember that the middle aged student will obviously have needs and abilities different both from those of the younger learners and from the very oldest learners. But they all <u>can</u> learn and surely they are all initially strongly motivated to do so or they would not be there.

We all recognize that the majority of so-called foreign language methodologies regard the 4 skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as very important — with oral production (speaking) perhaps being given a slight edge in importance. Certainly, to speak the language is what most students of any age say that they want to learn how to do. Now, when we think of older people initiating second or third language learning, we may tend to assume the rather prejudicial point of view that older students are poor language learners. After all, who can forget Penfield's studies which seemed to indicate a teen age as a cut-off for optimal language learning? But, in order to be fair to our older students, we had better become acquainted with some recent contrasting studies which claim that adults have larger vocabularies and comprehensions to draw on as they learn another language, and that they can grasp grammatical principles more easily. We don't have time or space to list these studies in detail here; we refer you again to Joiner's discussion in her Older Foreign Language Learner, pp. 8-9, whose summary paragraph reads:

> On the basis of the studies summarized . . ., we might hypothesize that the typical [younger] college-age student would be likely to outperform the older adult in programs that focus almost exclusively on listening and speaking, but that in a balanced skills approach, the older adults could achieve well by making the most of their extensive vocabulary and knowledge of grammatical principles. The fact remains, however, that we have precious little research to support such guesses. Our discussion of the nontraditional language learner is further complicated by the fact that for most foreign language teachers and researchers, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood has traditionally been the onset of puberty. Thus, very little information is available that would indicate whether a 16-year-old is more likely to be a successful classroom language learner than a 60-year-old.

There have, of course, been some studies dealing with the general nature of learning as performed by older students, again discussed at some length by Joiner (pp. 9 ff.). It is believed that the ability to

control massive short-term memory may decline with age; thus, pure rote memory of another language would be harder to achieve. But this should be compensated by the older adult's greater resources in areas of vocabulary knowledge and general information, including probably greater social and cultural awareness. Verbal reasoning may be less fluid, but mathematical reasoning is maintained. The older student, then, is still able to learn and retain information. Indeed, syntax, morphology, vocabulary, reading, writing can all be efficiently learned by adults of any age.

We must, on the other hand, recognize that aural/oral abilities in adults may be affected by auditory impairment. Joiner (p. 12) cites a U.S. National Health Survey which showed that whereas 85% of children from five to fourteen have normal hearing, only 12% of people over 65 do. In other words, 88% of our oldest learners do not have normal hearing. However, hearing impairment, statistically and generally speaking, increases only gradually until the age of 50, when it begins to increase sharply. Some observers believe that even the older adults with relatively little hearing loss find it harder to comprehend rapid speech. Joiner (p. 12) points out the obvious: "Teachers of older adults should . . . attempt to speak slowly and distinctly and to eliminate [distracting] noises as much as possible . . . ." Our ultimate goal of communication in the other language at a normal rate of speed may be delayed a bit by our older learners. Their competencies in both listening and speaking are apt to be achieved more slowly.

What is more, it has been found that adults perform less well in learning situations when under pressures of time and speed (Joiner, pp. 10 ff.). This could be either in the give-and-take of a regular class period or in a timed test of any kind. The older learner is often already under self-

pressure to perform very well, all the more because of feeling the need to compare well with younger students. Insistence on speed of response, oral or written , can be counter-productive and unnecessarily discouraging for an older student. As foreign language teachers, we have tended to recommend keeping a class moving, not letting silences fall, snapping our fingers under students' noses and the like. Perhaps we will need to ease off a bit in order to get maximum results from our older students.

And what of an appropriate curriculum, textbooks and materials? Common sense would indicate avoidance of exclusively youth-oriented subject matter and inclusion of cultural materials covering all ages in the target countries. Some of our college textbooks, fortunately, have already moved in this direction. We must be sure as we examine new texts, then, to add an awareness of agism to our previously extablished concerns about racism and sexism. Beyond the selection of basic texts, we as teachers must also add to our supplementary materials, if need be, more of whatever might interest our adult students: information about current economics, politics, the arts, leisure activities, everyday living conditions, Social Security and retirement practices in the target countries, and so on.

Joiner suggests (pp. 24 ff.) that the emphasis within our usual teaching methods themselves can be modified to appeal to adult students. These considerations also might affect our choice of texts further. We should remember that it has been found that totally withholding translation detracts from the meaningfulness which adults want, a meaningfulness which will assist their memorization and retention. Adults appreciate as well a study of linguistic and grammatical rules, while tending to dislike pattern practice and inductive grammar. Adults,

of course, could well benefit from the self-pacing offered by individualizing some aspects of instruction. Remembering always a possible aural/oral slowness of achievement on the part of our older students, we can still say that almost any current methodology can be made to succeed with adults as well as with the young, given a little adjustment and guidance by the teacher.

Having established a workable base from which to develop our handling of older adult students in our classes, we felt a need to learn more about the presence of such students within the state of Wisconsin. Raquel Kersten assembled some statistics relating to this possible new clientele in Wisconsin; we believe that it is probable that similar situations exist at least in our so-called Central States. Of course, Kersten looked mainly at aspects of the role of the teaching of foreign languages in the programs for the continuing education students: 1) the numbers of continuing education students in Wisconsin and 2) how to attract them to our foreign language classes.

In analyzing continuing education students within the University of Wisconsin System, the concept of such students is here limited to those who commute to school (rather than those in campus housing) and to those who attend school only part-time. This follows the criteria of a recent Task Force concerned with the part-time and commuter student for the Urban Corridor Consortium of the University of Wisconsin System, which includes the campuses at Green Bay, Milwaukee, Oshkosh and Parkside. The Task Force also included the two-year campuses at Fond du Lac and Waukesha in their considerations. Because of the greatly increasing number of part-time and commuter students in these particular campuses, the Task Force was assigned to studying their profile, their goals and needs.

TASK FORCE REPORT: U. OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM, URBAN CORRIDOR CONSORTIUM '81-'82

Campus	Total Enrollment	Age Break	Percentage
Green Bay	4,536	25 and older	37%
Milwaukee	26,663	25 and older	40%
Oshkosh	11,162	25 and older	32%
Parkside	5,677	23 and older	47%
Fond du Lac	539	24 and older	30%
Waukesha	2,080	23 and older	40%

The previous percentages become more specific when we look at the demographic profile of the students:

FALL 1981 FIGURES

	GBY	MIL	OSH	PKS	FDL	WAUK
FALL 1981 TOTAL ENROLLMENT	4536	26663	11162	5677	539	2080
Undergraduate	4259	22094	9175	5327	539	2080
Male	1803	10537	4177	2753	274	941
Female	2456	11557	4998	2574	265	1139
Graduate	277	4569	1987	350	--	--
Male	145	2136	987	200	--	--
Female	132	2433	1000	150	--	--
COMMUTER STUDENTS	3096	24797	7787	5677	539	2080
Undergraduate	2847	20228	5820	5327	539	2080
Male	1201	9709	2648	2753	274	941
Female	265	1646	10519	3172	2574	1139
Graduate	249	4569	1967	350	--	--
Male	131	2136	978	200	--	--
Female	118	2433	989	150	--	--
FULL-TIME STUDENTS	2795	14593	7682	2933	378	1028
Undergraduate (12+ cr)	2758	13243	7470	2922	378	1028
Male	1305	6677	3442	1591	213	553
Female	1453	6566	4028	1331	165	475
Graduate (9+ cr)	37	1350	212	11	--	--
Male	26	702	94	7	--	--
Female	11	648	118	4	--	--
PART-TIME STUDENTS	1741	12070	3480	2744	161	1052
Undergraduate (1-11 cr)	1501	8851	1705	2405	161	1052
Male	498	3860	735	1162	61	388
Female	1003	4991	970	1243	100	664
Graduate (1-8 cr)	240	3219	1775	339	--	--
Male	119	1434	893	193	--	--
Female	121	1785	882	146	--	--

Furthermore, the Task Force surveyed 1343 students, of whom 76% answered, leading the study committee to the following conclusions:

* Adult students are likely to be between the ages of 25 and 34.

* Women are almost twice as likely to participate in a college degree program as are men. This is brought about as a result of the changing role of women in society, a greater number of women entering the work force, and women taking more initiative for their personal and career development.

* Most adults attended a college or technical school at some time in the past, suggesting that the desire to attend college had been present for a period of time but was delayed because of one or more transitory or situational barriers.

* Because of work, family, and community involvement responsibilities, most adult degree seekers are enrolled on a part-time basis.

* There appears to be a moderate to strong relationship between the reason an adult delayed college entry and the triggering event. For example, if family obligations were a barrier, those responsibilities may have lessened; or if job responsibilities or lack of interest kept a student out of school, then job dissatisfaction and external encouragement may have been determining forces in the decision to return to school.

(from "A Study of Factors which Precipitate Adult Enrollment in a College Degree Program," Timothy J. Sewall, Wisconsin Assessment Center, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, April, 1982.)

The results of the Task Force study, including consideration of some special needs of the part-time and commuter students regarding scheduling, smooth transition and other special needs in relationship to the faculty and in methodology, are, of course, very similar to those found in nation-wide assessments mentioned earlier in this paper. Thus, we can assume that the Wisconsin System is not unique in the nation, rather that it corroborates the trend in education toward a larger adult student population. The study done by the Task Force shows as well that the University of Wisconsin System, among others, is trying seriously to find ways to satisfy the needs of the continuing student.

In addition to adjusting our present offerings and our methodology to the needs of the continuing/older students, what else can we — especially in Wisconsin , perhaps — do to attract them to our foreign language classes?

First of all, we might increase their numbers in our classes if we keep the counselors and academic planners informed of the multiple current needs at the national level for studying foreign languages. We may find it necessary to inform them over and over again! As Barbara Elling says in her article "New Cases for Foreign Language Study"

> Education must anticipate the future. Education of Americans for the future requires curricula designed to teach the general and the specialized, the humanistic and the pragmatic bodies of knowledge. These curricula must be based on the recognition that the twenty-first century . . . will require Americans with a better knowledge of the international community . . . .

Then, to underline the practical application of this statement, we could cite also recent increases in student exchanges, the volume of U.S. mail sent abroad, the number of overseas telephone calls, the number of people employed in the travel industry, the trade between free-world nations, the two-way flow of international investments, the staggering percentage rise in international travel — both to and from the United States. (These figures can be obtained from a variety of government sources and others: students, Institute of International Education; mail, U.S. Postal Service; telephone calls, Federal Communications Commission; trade, International Monetary Fund; investments, U.S. Department of Commerce; travel, U.S. Department of Justice; etc.) Need one point out that the majority of human beings contributing to these statistics are in the "adult" category?

We might also share with counselors and academic planners the information that Lorraine Strasheim included in her paper prepared for the Southern Conference on Language Teaching, 1975 (cited in Mead, ed., The Foreign Language Teacher: The Lifelong Learner, Northeast Conference, 1982, p. 11):

[foreign language education should]

(1) Provide an infinite variety of both credit and noncredit offerings.
(2) Move away from "standard sequences" and into a diversification of curricula.
(3) Consider language study as a vehicle rather than as an end in itself.
(4) Restructure language experiences to fit the learner rather than expecting the school to restructure itself to meet the requirements of foreign language teachers.
(5) Work with individualization, small groups, simulation, and gaming.
(6) Employ a variety of learning modes and use a variety of materials.
(7) Assist students to plan their studies toward the goal of life-long learning.

By these means and others, we can indicate the ability of foreign language study to contribute to the education of the student body in general, including the so-called adult or continuing-education student.

We have only begun to examine here some of the present and future aspects of foreign language teaching within the framework of continuing education. It is a subject which will be expanded upon as more and more teachers become involved in its real-life applications. We would also like to emphasize that this kind of teaching can be exceptionally rewarding. We have found, in our own classes, as Joiner had observed, that older students are generally well-motivated, willing to work, efficient in their use of time, and blessed with broad experiences to be shared in class. They are usually very appreciative of what is done

for them in class — they are articulate about it — they almost never demand service or, conversely, take it for granted as the young sometimes do. (Of course, there are a few exceptions . . . .)

We would like to share with you a few of our warm memories of older students. Some of them date from just after the Second World War, when not only did we have returning GI's but exiles whose papers had been lost — and who wanted to reestablish their educational qualifications. Their world views were a bonus for regular students. More recently, we can recall:

Alice T. — who grew up bilingual (German), but who chose to study French at the age of 59. Two years later, she was observed traveling through France with a Frenchwoman who spoke no English — communicating happily if not necessarily perfectly.

Dorothy and Pat — two women in their forties, who returned to the study of French at the second-year college level. Eventually, Dorothy attained an M.A. and taught at the junior high level. Pat attained a Ph.D. and teaches at a college. The friends encouraged each other!

Anna G. — born in Switzerland, bilingual German and French, having lived in America since young adulthood and raised a family, she showed up in language classes in order to obtain certification as a teacher — and has been an outstanding high school teacher of German.

Judy C. — wife, mother, self-taught businesswoman, she returned to studies in order to obtain a degree in business — combining this with a minor in French, including a course in business French.

men and women too numerous to list by name — who came to us from various foreign countries such as Malaysia, China, Japan, Algeria, Libya, Haiti, Germany, South America. Sometimes they studied their own languages, cultures, literatures, et cetera; sometimes they chose others. Even when they argued with their teachers, they added a reality and enrichment to their classes that would have been hard to obtain otherwise.

And now a direct word to our audience: you may already have your own past and present positive experiences with older learners. What we have summarized here will only reinforce what you have discovered on your own. If, however, you are just beginning your work with older students, don't hesitate to adapt and expand your materials and methods to meet this new challenge. All signs indicate that potential students of foreign languages in the category of older students are numerous around us. If they are not yet loudly knocking on your door, they most probably soon will be. Welcome them: the pleasure of their company makes our teaching more enjoyable.

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay